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Pupils' Language Competence in the Primary School: A Literature Review

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Abstract: This paper, which forms part of an ongoing PhD study, attempts a summary overview of research on pupil competence in modern languages in the primary school, as presented by a Systematic Literature Review (SLR). The research question for the SLR was: "What sort of evidence do research papers present for pupil competence skills and language progress in the primary school?" The paper reflects on the literature review findings in regard to pupil language competence and the recommendations for practitioners and policy makers they offer.

Keywords: Pupil Language Competence, Pupil Language Skills, Primary School, Modern Languages

Introduction

In recent years there has been a growing interest in introducing Modern Language instruction to children at ever younger ages. This tendency derived from the European Union's commitment to enable all of Europe's citizens to learn two languages in addition to their mother tongue, as first outlined in the Barcelona Agreement (European Council, 2002:19). Henceforth, L1 means 'native language' or 'mother tongue' whilst L2 and L3 mean the first and second additional language learned respectively. In Scotland, the Scottish Government has promoted the 1+2 language policy and has introduced the teaching of the first additional language from the beginning of the primary school (Scottish Government Working Group, 2013).

This interest in early language learning gave a strong rationale to a search of the literature for evidence about language teaching and learning, its impacts on the primary pupil, and methods of early L2 acquisition. As part of this first step to "establish a reliable evidence base for recommendations to schools, teachers and CPD providers" (Davies et al, 2013:81), I undertook a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) looking at primary pupils' modern language competences and awareness. In this article, I examine the overall findings of the SLR, and present a conclusion with recommendations for researchers, teachers and policy makers.

Research Question and Methodology

My initial search produced a total of 731 published articles from a wide range of international sources. I applied further broad filters to this collection by a brief review and some broader electronic sifting. Acceptable studies had to be based on empirical research, either qualitative or quantitative, and also clearly show a methodology (e.g. sample sizes, research instruments, analytic methods). I imposed a chronological limit

{2008-2014}, for reasons to do with the timing of language teaching policy initiatives. There were two further filters, one for taught second language, which removed projects from multilingual environments or with bilingual pupils, and one filter for pupil age, to maintain a focus on primary school environments. Finally, I had to impose a geographical filter on the origins for the remaining studies. This depended on a judgement concerning whether primary school education systems housed arrangements similar to the standard UK pattern.

Thus, the selected literature highlighted in this article only refers to modern languages taught in primary school settings. It also excludes studies involving bilingual pupils (who speak another language at home). English is covered as an L2 only when English is not the dominant language of the community. However, such studies were accepted only from countries where there is a strong dominant language and where there are no linguistic variations that compete for recognition and dominance in the community. This was to exclude research from situations like the Indian subcontinent, or China, where many languages can be used in a school area, school lessons may be taught in a national language, rather than the local ones, and L2 can often be a passport language, such as English. Through the filter I tried to extract only nation states where people are monolingual citizens who recognise themselves as native speakers of a specific language, again to improve comparability between studies. Time wise, this literature review includes studies, published between 2008 and 2014, which relate to schools taking pupils from early years to the last year in primary, before the secondary school transition.

From the original 731 articles 67 remained after the application of these filters. These were re-read, analysed for content, and ranked thematically according to how precisely they focussed on my research issue. The identified research issue for this systematic literature review was to identify pupil competence in the taught L2; for example what sort of evidence the papers presented for development of competence, skills and language progress in the primary school.

Evidence from the Systematic Literature Review Selection

The selected articles from the Systematic Literature Review produced interesting findings about pupil progress in modern language knowledge, competence and skills in the primary school. The spectrum of evidence that appears in the literature includes multiple themes such as:

- language awareness, and metacognitive skills
- intercultural awareness
- searches for personal and collective identity
- motivation

Sometimes, the answer to the research question about pupil competence is well hidden among literature about teaching techniques and teacher language skills and those topics

which might define, produce or underlie ML competence in the primary classroom. The development of certain skills or even the lack of those skills are often noted only in specific contexts related to specific teaching approaches and, or teaching methods. Nevertheless, this systematic literature review did distinguish some clear evidence responding to the formal question of pupil competence as a research aim.

Language Awareness and Metacognitive Skills

There is evidence that pupils develop language awareness, cognitive and metalinguistic skills through their L2 learning in the primary school. White and Horst (2012) show that pupils can develop cognate awareness and recognise cognate similarities and differences between languages if they receive cross linguistic instructions from their teachers, who explicitly compare L1 and L2. The researchers claim that “teaching and practicing abstract cognate rules was feasible in late elementary school” (ibid: 192-193). Fortier and Simard (2008) also show that pupils can formulate metalinguistic knowledge. Pupils in their study showed linguistic sensitivity towards error, and reflect on grammatical errors and meanings, by explaining why these constitute a grammatical or syntactical error. According to Fortier and Simard (ibid), pupils develop this skill only when teachers’ approach is not limited to the communicative approach, now the staple of standard ML teaching practice in Scotland and across the other UK education systems. Teachers must also draw pupils’ attention to linguistic forms, and particularly morphosyntactic norms, i.e. drawing pupil attention to words and their spellings, their position in the sentence and their functions. On the other hand, language competence can sometimes also be achieved through fairly subtle alterations to teaching practice. Kirsch (2012), for example, found that even quite young Anglophone pupils were able to develop a range of language learning strategies without receiving explicit strategy instruction from their teacher. In her study pupils deployed “memorising strategies” (ibid: 390), writing and practising language (ibid: 394), developed learner autonomy, and reflected on their language processes and strategy use (ibid: 395) when their teacher adopted a supportive role through ‘scaffolding’ pupils’ learning, i.e. by offering them ways to solve problems and evaluate their own learning, rather than openly solving challenges for them and keeping the evaluation of learning as an activity for the teacher alone.

Other studies prefer to discuss language competence in the more traditional four language skills format (speaking, reading, writing and comprehension). Kruk and Reynolds (2012) conclude that “immersion as an educational context that exposes children to an additional language can be beneficial to reading achievement”. In their study, young Anglophone “at-risk” readers in primary school grew greater phonological awareness, developed better decoding skills, and reached a higher reading comprehension level by experiencing an L2 immersion school programme than did their counterpart control group. Another study (Björn and Leppänen, 2013) showed how pupils developed phonological awareness and strengthened L2 production and reading skills through a computer-based intervention programme. Pupils received teacher’s L2 pedagogical intervention alongside their participation in educational computer games.

According to the researchers (ibid:687), “students need to have good “learning to learn” skills in order to achieve the best possible results from their learning”; i.e. pupils need to know both how to learn and that they are learning.

Intercultural Awareness

There is also some evidence that pupils develop cultural awareness, often taken as an important component of language competence, through L2 learning in the primary school. Barton et al. (2009) evaluate a project focussed on L2 teaching and learning in primary schools. They conclude that pupils developed intercultural awareness, and positive attitudes towards the “foreign”, when they received a language awareness programme side by side with L2 instruction. Pupils reported being more interested in finding out similarities and differences between cultures and being more aware of “the importance of understanding cultural differences” (ibid:155) when involved in L2 learning. Moloney (2009), investigating intercultural competence in upper primary school language learners, also found that pupils became more aware of their cultural identity and noted changes to their mentality as they learn other languages and other cultures side by side. This suggests that young learners will always negotiate their intercultural identities and memberships in the target culture groups whilst they learn an L2. Lastly, Gruson and Barnes (2012) emphasise the development of intercultural awareness in primary school language pupils through the employment of computer-mediated communication (CMC). Their study showed that both the Anglophone and non-Anglophone pupils modified the language that they use, and adjusted it, in order to facilitate comprehension of their respective school partners in France or England. According to the authors, this is “an important aspect of young learners’ (intercultural) communicative competence” (ibid: 86) because they show awareness of language difficulties met by their partners, and because they are able to manipulate their own L1 in order to get their communicative messages across.

Identity

The notion of identity is another element that attracts the interest of researchers and which comes up in studies about pupils’ language knowledge, skills, and competence. Specifically, this is usually taken to mean the construction of the personal and collective identity of pupils through L2 teaching and learning in the primary classroom. The notion of identity construction is usually combined with the development of intercultural awareness (cf. Moloney, 2009). However, Aro (2012) shows convincingly that the newly constructed language learner’s identity is always influenced by authority, rather than by the constraints and liberations of a new language, or fresh understanding of their old one. Pupils express beliefs and points of view according to what authority has prescribed and how learners view learning opportunities both in and outside of the classroom: “Such beliefs may thus influence how the children voice themselves as learners and users of L2.” (ibid: 343).

Motivation

Another area commonly mentioned in the research is pupil progress. This always means ‘changes in pupil competence’, so I have treated papers about ‘progress’ in L2 as the same as papers about ‘competence’ in L2. There is an assumption that motivation always brings language development. That is why motivation is associated with the development and progress, in language knowledge, skills and competence on the part of young language learners in the primary classroom. According to the evidence from different studies, pupil skills and competence are very frequently associated with the notion of motivation, which is considered as the driving force and the unquestionable impetus for learning (Dörnyei, 2005).

Martin’s (2012) evaluation of the Key Stage 2 (Primary School) Language Learning Pathfinder Project in England found that most pupils were positive about language learning. However, a number of challenges would need to be overcome to ensure that positive attitudes would remain so in the long term. For example, some pupils reported feeling “frustrated at their own limited progress and complained about the amount of repetition and lack of challenge in lessons” (ibid: 360). This points to the importance of good initial and continuing teacher education, and the importance of transition arrangements between primary and secondary school.

Another two studies which associated motivation with language progress and foregrounded teaching and learning (Macrory et al, 2012; Phillips, 2010) reported that pupils developed listening and speaking skills through video-conferencing, and their positive learning experiences there increased their motivation and confidence.

Some studies explored reasons for demotivation. Tierney and Gallastegi (2011) specifically researched pupils’ attitudes towards modern languages in the primary school, and they find that pupils’ motivation is based on their enjoyment of classroom activities and their desire to speak the language of others (ibid:495). They also mention that “boredom [and] lack of interest in activities such as copying or listening to tapes” (ibid: 495) demotivate them. At the same time, pupils refer to their own perception of the difficulty that an L2 presents. However, the study (ibid) shows strongly that pupils’ motivation continues as long as they manage the language difficulties, and see themselves as language speakers. Cable et al. (2012) also report decreased motivation due to the teaching of language in a non-communicative, and not obviously purposeful, context, especially with increased amounts of the use of commercial resources, and a lack of progression.

Implications for Language Learning and Teacher Education

In an era where the 1+2 Approach is beginning implementation for the primary school in Scotland, local authorities are just starting work on the practicalities of the policy. In this part, I look at other relevant literature and consider, as a first step towards informed discussion of the policy and its implementation, what the literature reveals about pupils’ language progress in the primary school. I also introduce some additional literature which did not emerge from the SLR but supports the discussion. What should be

straightforward information gathering for practitioners who seek practical guidance from language teaching theory is, however, complicated and confused. This time, I think, the complexity comes from massive overlays of political opinion and spin originating in many opposed institutions and sources at local, state and national levels. In my opinion, it reflects a wide variety of entrenched ideological viewpoints.

Implications for Language Awareness and Metacognitive Skills

To cut through this discursive undergrowth, teachers in search of ways to measure and achieve language competence, or progress in learning, might wish to consider a focus on language awareness and the development of metacognitive skills. The research suggests that primary school pupils are definitely able to develop metacognitive and metalinguistic skills, as well as language awareness. This, in turn, implies that teachers develop the requisite pedagogic knowledge to boost just that explicit knowledge of language which leads, for example, to an awareness of, and ability to correct, error (Driscoll et al., 2004). “Young learners can be trained to explore languages as explicit and dynamic systems” (Bouffard and Sarkar, 2008:22). This is an aspect of teaching that primary schools can use as a focus. In order to develop and boost language awareness and metalinguistic skills, primary school teachers should be confident in their own use of both L1 and L2. They should be able to make and activate associations between L1 and L2, and draw their pupils’ attention to similarities or differences between the languages.

Implications for Intercultural Awareness

Pupils can learn a language without necessarily developing intercultural awareness but, as Woodgate-Jones and Grenfell (2012: 341) argue, “a good deal of cultural information is soaked up by the second language learner, and this helps develop understanding and empathy with the culture, which itself will enhance motivation and subsequent learning”. On the other hand, simple cultural facts about other countries can have very little relevance to a learner who has no personal experience of travelling and no real notion of the other country (ibid). Another concern for teachers is how to assess the development of intercultural awareness (Vogt and Tsagari, 2014:385). While pupils are studying an L2 intercultural awareness is more clearly delineated as an area for the personal and social development of the primary school pupil when it is also an area of special interest for policy makers and practitioners (Curriculum for Excellence, Modern Languages Principles and Practice, no date).

Implications for Identity

The search for individual and collective identity needs to be rethought as it impinges on the L2 curriculum in the primary school. This means that practitioners need to look at “what kinds of things learners deem important and worthwhile when learning and using the language and how learners view learning opportunities both in and outside of the classroom” (Aro, 2012:343). Not just language teaching practitioners but increasingly the whole school staff in Scottish primary schools will need to think about the role of

both L1 and L2 in moulding pupil identity. Pupils take ownership of their language learning and their classroom L2 discourse in sense-making activities both as modern language speakers in their own right (L2), as well as language learners, that is that they have both user and learner identities at the same time (St John, 2010).

Implications for Motivation

As we saw above, in the earlier section of the paper, motivation is in general use as a proxy for measures of development of language skills. It is therefore another area that needs to be taken into consideration in any informed discussion, simply because it cannot be separated from discussion of language skill development that is more difficult to measure. Keeping motivation alive is indeed a key factor for Modern Language survival as a school subject, throughout the age range. Tierney and Gallastegi (2011:495) suggest that teaching approaches that have not worked should be minimised or eliminated. Martin (2012) recommends that pupil motivation should be encouraged and developed in all its different varieties, integrative and instrumental, extrinsic and intrinsic, as part of the primary language learning experiences. Sparks et al. (2009) have shown a positive correlation between L2 achievement and motivation. However, we should bear in mind that when students demonstrate high interest and engagement in language lessons there is no necessary implication that students will attain better proficiency levels. We can witness this when that competence is measured according to the European Survey on Language Competences (Araújo and de Costa, 2013). Further research is needed into the role of research variables such as pupil motivation and pupil lesson evaluation and their effect on pupil progress in language learning to give us deeper, and more reliable, insights into the whole process of teaching and learning languages at primary school level.

Concluding Thoughts

Given the priority accorded by the Scottish Government to the 1+2 approach to language learning there is an opportunity for language practitioners and policy makers to revisit current practice in the view of recent studies and relevant literature reviews on primary school language learning and teaching. However, I agree with Mitchell (2010) who states that changing practice is a complex activity in itself, and there are multiple factors that can influence outcomes: the educational system, traditional pedagogic cultures, institutional cultures, and the beliefs and performance of individual language practitioners all play a significant part. These factors also have their influence on local student language experiences, the vital arbiters of eventual performance. We clearly need more exploration and research to make sense of organising that multilingual approach in Scotland.

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